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0521025508 - Fairies in Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature

Nicola Bown

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction. Small enchantments*

This book is about magic and enchantment, but it is also about disillusion and fear. It is about the wonderful yet appalling modern world the Victorians made, and why they consoled themselves for their disquiet at it by dreaming of fairies. The Victorians thought of themselves as makers and masters of the modern world: that is the self-image they were most anxious to pass on to posterity. But they also felt oppressed by their responsibilities, fearful of the future and doubtful of the unalloyed benefits of progress. Fear, anxiety, doubt and pessimism cannot be magicked away, it is true, but they can be given an enchanted form. The Victorians dreamed of fairies, who worked a small enchantment for them, and gave them back the wonder and mystery modernity had taken away from the world. They made the fairies into imaginary versions of themselves, and imagined fairyland as a version of the world they themselves inhabited. They consoled themselves by looking at their worst fears and greatest worries for themselves and their world in a magical, enchanted form. By looking at and reading about fairies, the Victorians could imagine themselves as being still in the world they had given up for modernity. They shaped fairyland into the negative image of their own disenchanted world, and saw their own disappointed forms transfigured in the shape of the fairy.

Fairies were everywhere in nineteenth-century culture: in the nursery, certainly, but also in the parlour or drawing room, on the stage and on the walls of annual exhibitions. Fairies were not just for children, nor even mostly for children. Adults fell under their spell freely, and indulged a taste for escapist fantasy in visions and descriptions of fairies and fairyland. The fascination with fairies which is the subject of this book emerged in the late eighteenth century, and the fairy was a pervasive cultural figure for more than a hundred years. Indeed, so many and various were the forms that the captivation with fairies took that in this book I look at only a few of them. Hundreds of fairy operas and operettas, plays,

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songs and ballets were produced in the nineteenth century, too many for me to deal with here. The same goes for the enormous numbers of fairy tales, traditional and literary, which were published during the period. In this book I concentrate on fairies in paintings, poetry and non-fictional prose. These genres interest me because they allowed the Victorians, most of all grown-up ones, an outlet for their regressive and escapist fantasies. When I first became interested in nineteenth-century fairies I was startled by the mixture of strangeness and sentimentality I encountered. This book is about that combination of strangeness and sentimentality, and in it I argue that understanding the Victorians' enchantment with fairyland is central to understanding their emotional responses to their own world.

The Victorians were fascinated by the supernatural: by ghosts and vampires, by spirits of the dead, by angels, by the gods of other cultures. Their interest in fairies differed from that in other forms of the supernatural, though some themes were constant. In an age of widespread religious doubt, it is not surprising that people's thoughts should have turned to the persistence of the dead and to occult methods of communicating with them. Though Victorian society was acutely conscious of its own modernity, the lure of the past and its beliefs was felt by many. The influence of the empire and its diversity of faiths and gods also prompted many to search beyond Christian traditions for enlightenment. All of these factors affected the interest in fairies. But fairies differ from ghosts and spirits in that they are not manifestations of the dead; fairies have nothing of the ghastly power of the dead awakened. They are local rather than exotic, and many saw them as peculiarly British, part of a national culture. And they lack the powers of the gods, for fairies are small, and work only minor magics. The gods inspire awe; they are omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. Though sometimes malicious, fairies are more often mischievous; generally they are nice rather than nasty. Finally, and most importantly, belief in fairies was not required in order for them to act as a consolation for modernity. Most Victorians who dallied with the fairies did not believe in them, though many thought that their forebears had so believed, and they found the conditions of this credence fascinating. Unlike heaven, hell or the 'other side', the idea of fairyland could be entertained *as if* one believed in it without actually doing so. In a period when many were tormented by religious doubt, such 'as if' belief in supernatural beings whom one knew perfectly well did not exist must itself have been a consolation.

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The book begins in the eighteenth century and ends in the early twentieth century, and so spans a long nineteenth century. The awakening of interest in fairies I discuss in chapter 1 created the conditions for the flowering of fairy painting and poetry in the nineteenth century. The Victorian period is the focus of chapters 2 and 3, which cover the decades between 1830 and 1870. These two chapters discuss the preoccupation with fairies at its fullest extent and development: it was the Victorians who were the real connoisseurs of the fairy. Chapter 4 mirrors the first by tracing the disappearance of the Victorian fascination with fairies and discussing the reasons why it ended. The content of each chapter is delineated thematically as well as chronologically. The first chapter focuses on the way that changing values accorded to the imagination and to tradition led to the emergence of the fairy as a significant cultural figure. I argue that the interest in fairies is part of a wider rejection of the values of the Enlightenment which found its fullest expression in Romanticism. I also argue that it was these factors which meant that while men were fascinated by fairies, women were largely indifferent to them. In the second chapter, I discuss some of the ways in which fairies represented the modern world. I focus on three issues: the invention of the hot air balloon, the effect on ideas of scale of the development of the steam engine and the factory system, and the idea of Arcadia in the industrial age. I argue that representations of fairies were shaped by reactions to these aspects of modernity, even though fairyland initially seems a long way away from modern technology and industry. The third chapter looks at the ways in which Victorian ideas about science were refracted through representations of fairies. I argue that the figure of the fairy was a potent metaphor for both optimistic and anxious reactions to the scientific developments of the mid-nineteenth century, and that representations of fairies show the emotional effects on the Victorians of scientific ideas such as the theory of evolution by natural selection. The final chapter argues that by the end of the Victorian period the relation of the past and present had become an urgent problem, and that laments for the disappearance of the fairies were a nostalgic expression of this problem. The book ends with a discussion of the way World War One dispelled the enchantments the fairy had been able to offer the Victorians.

There are always other ways in which one might write a book, and this is no exception. Rather than attempting a comprehensive survey of either fairy painting or poetry, instead I discuss them together in order

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to shed light on wider cultural preoccupations. This means that I have selected only a few of the hundreds of fairy paintings exhibited in the nineteenth century and only a sample of the poems and other writings about fairies published during the period. I have excluded fairy stories written for children in order to concentrate on why grown-ups were interested in them, and this means that for the most part I have also left aside book illustration. A question I have not taken up is the connection between the Victorian interest in fairies and nationalism. Nationalism, particularly in relation to Scotland and Ireland, was an important political and social issue during the period, and the representation of fairies was much affected by nationalist ideas. At its most extreme, the dialogue about Irish home rule could become an argument about who had the better fairies: England or Ireland. To a certain extent this topic is dealt with in Carole Silver's *Strange and Secret Peoples*, but it deserves an extended discussion.¹ Yet another topic I have left aside is the role of the fairy in working-class culture, a subject that receives some attention in *Troublesome Things* by Diane Purkiss.²

Painting and poetry are notoriously middle-class interests, and the other debates and texts to which I have referred can be assumed to have circulated mainly among the educated middle class. The interests and tastes of the educated middle class are by no means the beginning and end of Victorian culture; however, because of its economic, social and cultural dominance, the concerns of this class loom largest over this period as a whole. And anxiety, wherever one finds it, is still anxiety. In fact, my interest centres largely, though implicitly, on the emotional lives of middle-class men and women. However, it is notable that virtually all the representations of fairies I discuss were produced by men. Rather than retelling the familiar story of how Victorian men idealised and infantilised women, something which might also be said about the way they pictured fairies, I consider other reasons why men should be so interested in the figure of the fairy. To look at the costs to Victorian men of always having to be 'grown up' is not to belittle the struggles of Victorian women to free themselves from the ways in which they were made to be childlike. Dreaming about fairies and fairyland was one of the ways in which middle-class men tried to ease the burden of their privilege and escape from the pressures and anxieties of authority.

In this book I bring together literary texts, paintings, scientific and sociological writings, folklore, philosophy and journalism. One of the most

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remarkable things about fairies in the nineteenth century is the huge variety of contexts in which they occur. There is almost no discourse in which one might not come upon a mention of the fairy, even in such an apparently insignificant way as a synonym for ‘small’ or ‘delicate’ or ‘wonderful’. Indeed, these small mentions form a large part of the evidence that is the basis for the argument I make in this book. It is because fairies appear in these very diverse contexts that I have chosen to bring different genres and media together. Fairy painting originated in the illustration of literary texts, and the use of the fairy as a metaphor in non-literary writings is part of a wider mutual influence between literature and other discourses. Though it is true that words and images do not work in the same way and that they are in some ways antithetical, Victorian culture generally is marked by a close association between word and image. Though literature and the visual arts have their own traditions and formal properties, in this period they often mirrored each other very closely. Literary texts and paintings refer back and forth to one another; they work through the same cultural preoccupations, and they imagine the world in very similar terms. The representation of fairies in both paintings and literary and other kinds of texts is shaped by this close association of word and image, even though they also envision fairies very differently. Therefore, in each of the chapters I discuss paintings alongside literary and other texts, often using images of fairies as the focus of my argument.

The fairies in nineteenth-century art and literature came from many sources. In part, they originated in the goblins, brownies, white women, pixies, nixies and Robin Goodfellows of folk belief. From the late eighteenth century onwards, these legends were ardently collected, collated and compiled into increasingly sophisticated systems of fairy belief. It was widely thought that the way of life that had sustained this rich fairy lore was dying out, and enthusiasts hurried to record such stories as they might before they were all forgotten. At first these collectors thought of themselves as antiquaries, but by the middle of the nineteenth century they styled themselves folklorists. The change of name signalled a change of emphasis: instead of being learned in arcane knowledge, they were studying the culture of the common people and helping to preserve it for posterity. The results of their endeavours were published widely, in scholarly and popular books, in learned journals and in mass-market periodicals. Even if the urban population had discarded its superstitions and forgotten the fairies when people moved from the

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country to the town, the wide dispersal of folktales and legends was there to remind people of the beliefs and sayings of their forebears. In many respects the widespread fascination with folklore shaped the way that fairies appeared in art and literature in this period. But there were other influences at work: for example, the Shakespeare revival of the eighteenth century was also responsible for awakening the interest in fairies. The great reverence in which Shakespeare was held, and the increasing number of productions of his plays, stimulated interest in the supernatural beings who appear in them. In particular, Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, which sponsored the first of many projects to illustrate Shakespeare's works, prompted artists to give visual form to the fairies.

These two sources came together in Romanticism. Romantic poets and artists not only revered Shakespeare (as well as Spenser and medieval romances), they were also interested in popular culture. They were attracted by the misty world of superstition and enchantment which lay behind the legends collected by Romantic writers such as Walter Scott. Nearly all the Romantic poets wrote at least one fairy poem, but rarely are the fairies in these poems taken from either a purely literary or legendary source. Shelley's early epic, *Queen Mab* (1813), for example, takes a figure who occurs both in folklore and in Shakespeare, yet his fairy resembles neither of these. When Blake has a fairy sit upon his table and dictate *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794), the fairy is neither purely legendary nor purely literary. He catches the fairy in his hat and, as with a leprechaun, having caught him can command him; the fairy answers him, however, in words far removed from those of legendary fairies: 'I will write a book on leaves of flowers. / If you will feed me on love-thoughts, and give me now and then / A cup of sparkling poetic fancies.'³

The Romantic fairy is a figure associated with nature, with magic and with romance; it is tiny and beautiful and possesses butterfly wings. This is the kind of fairy which, for the most part, populated the Victorian imagination, and which is the subject of this book. Although it has a family resemblance to Puck, Ariel and the other Shakespearean fairies, and to the supernatural beings of popular superstition, in most respects it is a very different creature. Even when nineteenth-century artists and writers refer to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Tempest*, or draw upon stories of leprechauns, hobgoblins or kelpies, the fairy they have in mind is not the 'original', 'authentic' fairy of the source, but this creature of the Romantic imagination. A good example of the mixed character of

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Figure 1. J. M. W. Turner, *Queen Mab's Cave*.

the Romantic fairy is J. M. W. Turner's *Queen Mab's Cave* (1846; fig. 1). The title of this painting alludes to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and to Shelley, yet it illustrates neither; nor does it refer to any folklore source. Neither of its apparent literary sources seems to have much relation to the picture.

Though hard to make out, the picture seems to be a cliff scene, with a flooded cave in the centre; high, receding cliffs to either side; and on the top of the cliffs, a ruin that alternately resembles Tintagel and the Parthenon. In Turner's late manner, the sea, cliffs and ruin fade into one another: we see looming masses, shadows, and areas of luminosity, but it is impossible to tell where land ends and sea begins, or what is rock and what is ruin. The fairies partake of the same uncertainty. They emerge from the shimmering surface of the water, some seeming to hover above it and some to be swimming in it; some misty figures flicker in and out of focus in the rocky headland, and it is difficult to say definitely whether they are there or not. The fairies one can see clearly are nymph-like; to the right, one is being lifted out of the water by a swan, in a seeming reference to Leda; but those on the rock are red, and may

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well refer to the iconography of demons. This picture brings together fragments of the past and references to various kinds of supernatural beings, and sets them on the shore, where land and sea meet in a play of light and colour which makes it impossible to discern which is illusion and which is reality. In its review of this painting, the *Art-Union* called it ‘vague, illusive and fanciful . . . a gorgeous daylight dream’.⁴ Turner painted only one picture of fairies, yet he encapsulated the Romantic conception of fairies and fairyland perfectly in this one image: creatures on the border between illusion and reality, in a place not of one time but of many. In this picture fairyland is not just an imaginary country peopled with imaginary beings: it is a metaphor for the imagination, the faculty that blurs the boundary between illusion and reality, and turns them into a ‘gorgeous daylight dream’.

The other way in which Romanticism shaped the fairy and fairyland was by making them melancholy. Fairies in Shakespeare are amorous, quarrelsome and lyrical; the fairies of legend are sometimes mischievous, sometimes malicious, and even when they are on good terms with humans, must always be propitiated. Romantic fairies, by contrast, are often plaintive and sorrowful. Keats envisioned the creative imagination as ‘Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam / Of faery lands forlorn’, setting the pattern for a nostalgic view of fairyland receding into the golden past, a magic country to which we can return only in wistful imaginings.⁵ This mood found its most potent expression in one of the most popular of Victorian poems, Tennyson’s ‘Bugle Song’ from *The Princess* (1847):

O hark, O hear! how thin and clear,
And thinner, clearer, farther going!
O sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!
Blow, let us hear the purple glens replying:
Blow, bugle; answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying.⁶

Representations of fairies took on this melancholy hue because fairies were associated with yesterday, with past glories, lost worlds and times that can never come again. And because they were also imaginary creatures, ideas about fairies were coloured by the terrible paradox of the Romantic imagination: strive as one might to create another reality or to transfigure the world through the creative power of the imagination, in the end that effort must end in failure. As Letitia Landon put

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it in her poem 'Fantasies', if fairies are real, they are as real only as dreams:

I

I'm weary, I'm weary, – this cold world of ours;
 I will go dwell far, with fairies and flowers.
 Farewell to the festal, the hall of the dance,
 Where each step is a study, a falsehood each glance;
 Where the vain are displaying, the vapid are yawning;
 Where the beauty of night, the glory of dawning,
 Are wasted, as Fashion, that tyrant, at will
 Makes war on sweet nature, and exiles her still.

II

I'm weary, I'm weary, – I'm off with the wind:
 Can I find a worse fate than the one left behind?
 – Fair beings of moonlight, gay dwellers in air,
 O show me your kingdom! O let me dwell there!
 I see them, I see them! – how sweet it must be
 To sleep in yon lily! – is there room in't for me?
 I have flung my clay fetters; and now I but wear
 A shadowy seeming, a likeness of air.

III

Go harness my chariot, the leaf of an oak;
 A butterfly stud, and a tendril my yoke.
 Go swing me a hammock, the poles mignonette;
 I'll rock with its scent in the gossamer net.
 Go fetch me a courser: yon reed is but slight,
 Yet far is the distance 'twill bear me tonight.
 I must have a throne, – ay, yon mushroom may stay,
 It has sprung in a night, 'twill be gathered next day:
 And fit is such throne for my brief fairy reign;
 For alas! I'm but dreaming, and dreams are but vain.⁷

Dreams of escape, of endless play, of lightness, of being tiny in a miniature world, of a magically beautiful nature: these dreams recur again and again in nineteenth-century images of and writings about fairies. But who is to say that dreams are in vain? In the nineteenth century, and for the Victorians, in particular, such melancholy dreams were a consolation for their disappointment and weariness at their own, all too real, world.

This book is a sympathetic study of one of the less admirable aspects of Victorian culture, the regressive longings and escapist fantasies that shaped its fascination with the supernatural. It is easy to condemn the

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Victorians for succumbing to the lure of an idyllic world which never existed, and for making such a sentimental figure as the fairy so important to their fantasy lives. But such judgements carry their own burden, for they sentence both the Victorians and ourselves to that hard discipline formulated by the Victorians' Modernist children which demands that dreams must always be of the future, must always be progressive, and can understand the desire to escape from the present and return imaginatively to the past only as reactionary. Nevertheless, anyone who takes Victorian fairies seriously must risk becoming implicated in the sentimentality of the Victorians' dreams and longings. Nowadays we counter our lapses into regression with irony, distancing ourselves from the charge of sentimentality with our own knowingness about it. This is the alibi that allows me to have a sparkly snow dome with a flower fairy inside it on my desk. But the Victorians were entirely without irony in their enjoyment of fairies: they took them quite seriously, and their pleasure was unmixed with ironic knowingness. So to speak, they liked their sentiment straight.

Towards the close of his meditation on sentimentality, Michael Tanner elegantly sums up the charges against it by terming it a 'disease of the feelings' in which huge, unfocused emotions are called up seemingly out of nowhere or in response to 'virtually random, or alternatively direly predictable stimuli'.⁸ Sentimental feelings are out of proportion to their objects, where there is an object, and the objects are ignoble compared to the floods of feelings in which the sentimentalist indulges. He continues, 'a further feature of sentimental feelings is that analysis of them – placing them in relation to their objects, positioning them in relation to other terms in one's emotional economy – shows that they are "easy", easy to come and easy to go, parts of "undisciplined squads of emotions".'⁹ Compared to the hard discipline of emotional integrity, the ease with which sentimental emotions are conjured up makes them suspect, if not downright ignoble. Yet Tanner concludes that there is a worse disease than sentimentality: the sterile, arid desert he finds depicted in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in which emotion has dried up altogether. Better too much and too easy than none at all.

This warning is central to a sympathetic understanding of Victorian sentimentality. As Wendy Wheeler has argued, the rationality of the Enlightenment, its pursuit of truth and progress and mastery, was itself a disease which had dire consequences.¹⁰ In the nineteenth century the widespread adoption of extreme forms of rationality, such as utilitarian philosophy, the factory system and laissez-faire economics, brought with them the threat of a deathly lack of feeling and a view of human beings as